



The Psychology of Auditioning

By Jessica Gardner
AUGUST 17, 2011



Auditions are a necessary evil that all actors must go through. Unfortunately, they can really mess with your head. You must prepare, psych yourself up, try to forget about it when it's over, and then deal with the probable rejection. How can you go through this hundreds, if not thousands, of times and still have a healthy state of mind?

Preparing Yourself for an Audition

The best way to get ready mentally for an audition is to go in as prepared as possible. "Make a professional-level commitment to your craft," says Karen Kohlhaas, New York-based director, author, teacher, and co-founder of the Atlantic Theater Company.

"Practice treating every audition, rehearsal, or scene you do for a class like it is a professional job. The more work you put in, the more you will feel you deserve to be there, and to be seen and heard by your auditors and audiences."

New York actor and acting coach Rosalyn Coleman Williams agrees that you should think of your audition as being cast in the role: "Focus on the joy of playing the role and do the prep—not a tryout but a casting. Then do your work as usual. Enjoy it."

Williams also thinks it's important to avoid thoughts about "they," such as "What are they looking for?"

"Spend your time on craft prep," Williams advises. "Go as far as you can in the time that you have." She thinks it can also help to set a task for yourself as an artist, such as "Today I am going to breathe as I listen." Pick something that you have been working on in your acting that you want to bring into the audition.

Los Angeles-based Holly Powell, who was a casting director for 23 years before she started teaching, emphasizes the importance of focus when preparing for an audition. "If you are focused on hoping you get the job or the important casting director who is in the room who can change your career, your mental focus will be in the wrong place," she says. "The voices in your head will always be there because that's the job of the mind, to think thoughts, but the job of an actor is to focus their thoughts." Powell suggests thinking about these four things before an audition:

- 1) Your sense of place: Where am I?
- 2) Your relationships: Who am I talking to and how do I feel about this person? Or who am I talking about and how do I feel about this person?
- 3) Your intention: What does the character want at the top of the scene?
- 4) Your "pre-beat": What happens the moment before the scene starts?

"Remember that an athlete does not hear all the screaming fans around them, because they are so mentally focused on their task," says Powell. "An actor also needs to find that mental focus." When you get in your car or enter the subway to go to your audition, start focusing on "who, what, and where."

Walking into the lobby is where many actors lose their focus or start sabotaging themselves. "Don't look around the lobby comparing yourselves to others," suggests Powell. "Don't chitchat with other actors, but remain in a focused state until they call your name."

Walking Into the Room

Walking into the audition room is the first step in the casting process. You don't want to look nervous or unprepared, or they might make up their mind about you right then and there. "You want to walk in with confidence, looking everyone in the eye," says Powell. "If you don't feel confident, fake it."

Many times, the auditors will chat with you before you start. If that happens, Powell recommends taking a deep breath after the chat and quickly get focused by running "Where am I, who am I talking to, what do I want, and what just happened" through your mind before starting. "If you have the mental focus of an athlete," she says. "You will forget about wanting to impress or wanting the job."

Los Angeles-based casting director Sunday Boling has auditioned actors for more than a decade, and she has seen how common it is for actors to "negate" themselves or the audition when they enter the room. "The actor has decided they are not right for the part, whether in looks or type, or the actor has decided they will never book the part for any number of reasons or the actor has decided that the part is 'just the one line' so they give it a cursory glance and show up with a bad attitude," she says. "Not only is that negative approach not helpful to the actor, but it is often quite noticeable to the casting director, director, and producer and the prophecy is then fulfilled. That actor does not book the job."

Leaving the Room

Williams has a ritual for when she leaves an audition: "After I leave, I say my thank-yous and walk a bit. This helps me shift from the creative reality back into the real world, like taking your costume off after the final bow in a play. During this time I take any artistic notes I need to make about the work. I have an ongoing note on my iPhone that says Audition Notes. I write whatever I think is notable about the audition that pertains to the work as I experienced

it. This is not where I write what their response was to the work. I note if I was able to achieve the task that set for myself as an actor in the audition room. If there's anything that I want to celebrate, I do so at this time as well. When I am finished, I drop the sides into a random trash can. It's over."

Kohlhaas teaches a five-step method for objectively evaluating every audition. The answers must only be about factors in your control:

- 1) What worked?
- 2) Why did each of those things work?
- 3) What could have worked better?
- 4) Why could each have worked better?
- 5) What am I going to do for next time?

"It's a deceptively simple process but very powerful, and you will definitely improve if you write the steps after every audition," says Kohlhaas. "The rule when you finish is that if you catch yourself obsessing on something outside your control, immediately put your attention on the list and get busy preparing for your next audition."

Remember when you are leaving the room that there are things you have no control over. You can't control your skin color, age, or height. "Don't tell yourself all the reasons you are wrong for the part," says Powell. You went in there, you brought your own personality, and tried to make the part right for you. Now it is for them to decide if that's what they want to cast for this.

Try to make plans for after the audition, even if it's going to the gym or the grocery store. Distract yourself. Meet with friends, if possible, and try not to think about the audition.

"When you choose to become an actor, you have really chosen a career as a professional auditioner," says Powell. She suggests that actors stop thinking about getting the job and instead think, "I had a chance to act today." She believes this puts the audition into a healthier light. "As a former casting director," she says, "I often would really love what an actor did in their audition, but felt for whatever reason they were not right for this particular part. I would always save their headshot and make notes to bring them back in again for another project."

Don't waste your mental energy trying to figure out what the casting director was thinking. "I find that when actors try and read my mind in the room, they are completely off the mark," says Boling. "Years ago on a film, we were having trouble filling a particular role. Finally, this guy came in and nailed it. We were thrilled. [After he finished reading], there was a slight pause and the actor bolted from the room. Stunned, I jumped up and tried to chase the actor down but he had vanished. The director wanted to re-direct and chat with him, but he was gone. I called his rep and asked him to please send the actor back. Turns out, the actor thought he had sucked, and so to forgo any further embarrassment, he ran out, jumped in his friend's car, and took off. That nearly cost him the job."

Don't Take it Personally

More often than not, you will not get the job. "This is the life you have chosen," says Powell. "So many actors stress for days after they have done the audition and are sure [we] have lost their phone number." Your best bet is to try to forget about it.

Powell urges actors to not play the "what if" game. Don't think "If I get it, I can buy that car" or "If I get it, my agent won't let me go."

"You did your job as an actor today, you had a chance to act, and you exercised your audition muscle. It's already a win," she says. "And remember, you have met another casting director or producer who has seen your work. That's a big step forward. If you happen to book the job, that's just the cream."

Sometimes, your well-intentioned friends and family might ask how your audition went. Williams usually says, "Which one? There are so many." If she does know which audition they mean, she says, "Uneventful, but thanks for asking" or "It was fun," but she doesn't get into it. You might want to consider keeping your auditions private, just for your own sanity, so you don't constantly have to explain to someone why you didn't get the job this time. Announce when you book a role only.

Kohlhaas' favorite audition story is from Oscar-nominated actor William H. Macy: "He told our acting students at Atlantic Theater Company that when he was an auditioning actor, he counted three runs of 50 or more auditions for which he got no response or callback whatsoever. That was obviously not because there was something wrong with his acting. Rejection is part of the game; it's what keeps the stakes high and success more gratifying."

Moving Forward

Every actor has his or her own process. Do whatever you need to do to keep yourself going. If you can't figure out what that process is, or if auditioning constantly upsets or scares you, you may need to take a class or find a coach to help you figure it out.

"Keep inspired, have heroes, and follow their stories and paths to success," says Kohlhaas. "Remind yourself what you want to give to people by being an actor and storyteller, instead of focusing on what you want to get. Train so you will enjoy acting more, and so you will feel you deserve your rewards."

Powell saw thousands of auditions over her 23 years as a casting director, and she says the most-successful actors in the audition process were relaxed and confident in their ability and knew they had no control over whether they booked the part or not. "They simply focused on their choices and what was going on in the scene. They were not desperate to get the job," she says. "You know when you have gone in on an audition and you didn't care one way or the other if you got the part, and you booked the job? That's because you weren't thinking, 'I hope I book this job' all the way through the audition. Casting directors can see in your eyes how badly you want the job, and they can also see when an actor is confident in his ability and loving the fact that they are practicing their craft today."

"Once when I really wanted a gig my agent said that it didn't go my way this time," says Williams. "I really appreciated the 'this time.' I can deal with that."

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